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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000637

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DEMARCHE: DEMOCRATIC EXPRESSION CRUSHED  
IN ZIMBABWE

REF: STATE 76465

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons: 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Jeter delivered the demarche on Zimbabwe to President Obasanjo on March 26. At that meeting he was joined by British High Commissioner Philip Thomas. Allied with South Africa, the GON opposes continued suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth, and wants to disband the Troika. Despite Mugabe's recklessness, publicly ostracizing Mugabe remains unacceptable to Obasanjo. For as long as he can, Obasanjo will stick to an approach of private dialogue and mild suasion in hopes of coaxing Mugabe to soften his violent opposition to political reform. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Meeting with President Obasanjo March 26 to discuss the crisis in the Niger Delta (septel), British High Commissioner Philip Thomas and Ambassador Jeter used the meeting as an opportunity to discuss Zimbabwe. In an earlier meeting on the same day, Obasanjo's Foreign Affairs Advisor Ad'obe Obe had mentioned that Commonwealth Secretary General McKinnon had visited Abuja on March 25 to

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meet Obasanjo and plan next steps in light of the end of the one year suspension of Zimbabwe (in March) and current events in that country. After canvassing some Commonwealth members, McKinnon had concluded there was a consensus for extending the suspension, Ad'obe said.

3. (C) In the meeting later that night with Obasanjo he confirmed that the GON disagreed with McKinnon's assertion. South Africa also viewed continued suspension as unacceptable and supported the reinstatement of Zimbabwe at the expiry of the suspension in March. President Obasanjo told Thomas and Jeter that he concurred with Mbeki's position. McKinnon was mistaken about consensus within the Commonwealth, Obasanjo contended. South Africa, Nigeria and several other African states opposed extending Mugabe's suspension. The Commonwealth was effectively at an impasse - with Obasanjo and Mbeki representing one stream of thought and McKinnon representing its antithesis.

4. (C) Obasanjo continued that McKinnon had developed a list of "5-6" issues to raise with Mugabe (Obasanjo avoided mentioning the specific issues.) Obasanjo revealed that his gameplan was to visit Zimbabwe after the Nigerian elections on April 19. In Zimbabwe he would personally raise these issues with Mugabe and press him to deal with these matters. It was clear that these issues were of great concern within the Commonwealth, and it was in Mugabe's interest to deal with them, Obasanjo declared, contending that he "would find a way to help Mugabe out of his current predicament."

5. (C) Obasanjo further stated that after delivering his message to Mugabe, the Commonwealth should wait a "reasonable period" to give Mugabe a chance to act. After that, the body should decide if the Zimbabwean President should be invited to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) if the suspension should be reactivated. If Mugabe made favorable progress, Obasanjo said he favored Mugabe's return to the fold in time to attend the CHOGM.

6. (C) Obasanjo also said he supported Mbeki's position that the Troika (Australia, South Africa and Nigeria) should be disbanded. His chain of logic was that sanctions should not be automatically extended since there was no consensus in the Commonwealth for sanctions. If sanctions were no longer valid, then the Troika had lost its reason of existence.

7. (C) In response to Thomas' question about Mugabe stepping down, Obasanjo responded the British were not

approaching this sensitive matter properly. Obasanjo said he had no difficulty raising the issue of retirement with Mugabe; the key was how to put the issue to him. Mugabe had to be convinced that it would be in his own interests to leave office, and that conclusion could not be reached through direct confrontation with him.

18. (C) COMMENT: The Troika is split, perhaps irrevocably so. Unfortunately, Zimbabwe became an "us versus them" issue within the Troika with South Africa managing to pull Nigeria its way. This probably did not take heavy exertion on Pretoria's part. Still, there ultimately may be some space between the Nigerian and South African positions. Nigeria sides with South Africa on ending the suspension and on the fate of the Troika; however, Nigeria also seems to realize that, at some point in the not too distant future, defending Zimbabwe will become untenable. For now, however, Nigeria is seeking every out, not only for Mugabe, but for itself.

19. (C) Comment Continued: Nigeria does not want to condemn an old ally and a leader who once symbolized African liberation. Thus, Nigeria will temporize and will be loathe to criticize Mugabe too harshly. The Nigerian preference is: (1) to meet with Mugabe in late April, (2) in order to raise the "concerns" of the Commonwealth, (3) with a decision on reinstating Zimbabwe (4) delayed until Mugabe has a chance to address these concerns is characteristic of this mind-set.

JETER